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ABSTRACT

Attribution of a disposition or trait to a person asserts information about the pattern of that person's behavior. Past research has suggested that a moral disposition implies only moral behavior, while an immoral disposition implies both moral and immoral behavior. The effect of these implicational schemata on attributions of morality was investigated to examine the relationship between moral dispositions and moral behaviors. Subjects (N=40) read stories about 4 persons, each of whom behaved either morally (returning lost money) or immorally (keeping lost money). Situational demands surrounding the behavior (peer pressure) facilitated either one or the other of these behaviors. Results from the measure of attributed morality revealed an interaction of behavior and situational demand. Compared to attributions on moral behavior, attributions on immoral behavior were relatively unaffected by situational demands. Immoral behavior resulted in relatively immoral attributions, regardless of situational demands. (Author/NRB)

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IMPLICATIONAL SCHEMATA AND THE ATTRIBUTION OF MORALITY

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Implicational Schemata and the Attribution of Morality

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When you attribute a disposition or trait to an acquaintance, you are asserting something about the pattern of that person's behavior. Our research program (Reeder & Brewer, 1979) is investigating the particular kinds of behaviors that are implied by dispositional terms. Today I would like to focus on morality--on the relationship between moral dispositions and moral behaviors.

When we say that a person is moral or immoral, what are we implying about their behavior? To investigate this question (Reeder, Henderson, Sullivan, note 2), subjects were asked if persons with moral dispositions were likely to perform immoral behaviors. For example, one set of questions took the form, "If a large reward were available for doing so, how likely is it that a person who is moral would try to act immoral?" Similarly, subjects were asked if immoral persons were likely to attempt moral behaviors. The results suggest that moral persons are thought unlikely to attempt anything immoral. For example, we probably think it is highly unlikely that a very moral person would do something immoral like steal from a charity fund for crippled children. But the results indicated that immoral persons are not believed to be so behaviorally restricted. Immoral persons are thought rather likely to attempt moral behaviors when it is in their own interest. For example, although we might consider a mafia hit man to be very immoral, we are probably not shocked to learn that he occasionally donates to a charity fund, especially when it is tax deductible.

To summarize, a moral disposition implies moral behavior, but little else. In contrast, an immoral disposition implies both immoral and moral behavior. We refer to these implicational relations as implicational schemata. The research I will be talking about examines the effect these implicational schemata have on attributions of morality.

One of the major principles of attribution concerns discounting (Kelley, 1973). Observers discount an actor's disposition as the cause of the actor's behavior if situational demands appear to have facilitated that behavior (Jones & Davis, 1965). For example, suppose a politician, who is running for office, describes him or herself as someone who never tells a lie--a paragon of virtue and morality. We might not fully accept this description because the politician needs to say these things in order to get elected.

A main point of our research is that implicational schemata may affect the extent the discounting principle applies. Both moral and immoral persons are thought likely to produce moral behavior. It follows that when an actor's moral behavior appears facilitated by situational demands, we will be uncertain about the actor's disposition. Thus, the discounting principle should apply in full force when an actor behaves in a moral way.

But only immoral persons are believed likely to do the immoral thing. Immoral behavior, whether it is demanded by the situation or not, would seem to imply the actor is immoral. Thus, the power of the discounting tendency should be relatively less in the case of immoral behavior.

Method

Forty college students participated in the study. All subjects read four stories. Each story described an actor who was exposed to situational demands that encouraged either moral or immoral behavior on the actor's part. The actor then responded to these situational demands by behaving in either a moral or an immoral way. We employed two scenarios to increase generality.

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the scenarios. In the lost and found scenario, the actor and a fellow student are asked by their instructor to obtain a movie projector from another building. On the way to get the projector, they observe a third person unknowingly drop a twenty dollar bill. The actor then picks up the money. In the moral demand condition, the actor's fellow student urged him to return the money, saying, "You'd better return the money. He'll probably really miss it. Besides you could get into trouble by keeping it." In the immoral demand condition, the fellow student urges the actor to "Keep the money. He'll probably never miss it. There is no way you could get into trouble." The actor then responds to these demands by either shouting to the person ahead and returning the money (moral behavior) or pocketing the money for himself (immoral behavior). Subjects rated the morality of the main actor in each of the four stories. The order of the four stories was randomized separately for each subject.

We also included a charity scenario. Each of the four stories involved a male actor who is with a date at a restaurant. The actor's date urges him to behave morally (give money to a charity box) or immorally (steal money from the charity box). The actor then responds to these situational demands by acting in a moral way (giving money) or in an immoral way (stealing money). Once again, subjects were asked to judge the morality of the main actor.

Results

Attributions of morality are shown in Table 1. These ratings were made on an 11-point scale labeled at the endpoints "very immoral" (1) and "very moral" (11), respectively. The major prediction is that the discounting tendency should be stronger in the case of moral than immoral behavior. That is, we expected that the effect of situational demands would be greater in the case of moral behavior than in the case of immoral behavior. A 2 (situational demands) x 2 (behavior) x 2 (scenario) analysis of variance revealed a significant interaction between

behavior and situational demands, $F(1,38) = 9.25$, $p < .01$. Although situational demands affected attributions based on both types of behaviors, the effect of demands was greater in the case of moral than immoral behavior.

Less important results revealed that the main effects of both behavior $F(1,38) = 225.70$, $p < .001$, and situational demand, $F(1,38) = 85.58$, $p < .001$, are significant. Finally, there is a significant behavior x scenario interaction, $F(1,38) = 7.16$, $p < .02$. This latter effect indicates that the difference between ratings based on moral and immoral behavior was greater in the charity (Ms = 8.64 vs. 3.21) than in the lost and found scenario (Ms = 8.12 vs. 4.33). No other effects reached significance, including the three way interaction involving situational demand, behavior, and scenario.

We included a second dependent measure. In particular, we wanted to see if the findings generalized to a dimension of morality not directly related to the observed behavior. Subjects were asked to rate how often the actor tells a lie on an 11-point scale. The endpoints on the scale were labeled "often" (1) and "never" (11), respectively. These ratings are shown in Table 2. Analysis of variance revealed a significant interaction of behavior and demand, $F(1,38) = 4.87$, $p < .05$. Situational demands had a greater effect on the moral behavior conditions (Ms = 6.65 vs. 8.43) than on the immoral behavior (Ms = 4.30 vs. 5.38) conditions. Once again, there were large main effects of the actor's behavior, $F(1,38) = 85.30$, $p < .001$, and situational demand, $F(1,38) = 50.89$, $p < .001$. It appears, therefore, that the morality judgments generalized to a different form of moral behavior. It is worth noting the magnitude on the main effect of behavior. Knowing that the actor failed to return a lost twenty dollar bill led observers to infer that the actor was also prone to telling lies.

Discussion

The major result of this study involves the asymmetrical effect of situational demands for moral and immoral behavior. Moral behavior by an actor leads

to very different attributions, depending on situational demands. When the actor's behavior is consistent with situational pressures, observers tend to discount the actor's disposition as a cause of the behavior. That is, observers attribute a moderate or neutral disposition to the actor. Following immoral behavior, however, attributions are relatively less affected by situational demands. If the actor failed to return a lost twenty dollar bill or stole money from a charity fund, he was rated relatively immoral regardless of situational demands (Ms = 3.08 and 4.50 on an 11-point scale).

The findings of this study are consistent with the implicational schemata discussed earlier. In particular, if only immoral persons are thought likely to attempt immoral behavior, an actor's immoral behavior uniquely implies that the actor is immoral. This pattern of implicational relations limits the extent to which the discounting principle applies to immoral behavior.

Prior work by Norman Anderson (1974) and Michael Birnbaum (1973) indicates that negative information about an actor weights heavily in our impressions. Kanouse and Hansen (1971) subsequently proposed a number of theoretical positions to account for these findings. These alternative theoretical positions might also offer reasonable accounts of the data in the present study. However, a potential merit of the schematic approach we have taken is that it also covers attributions in other areas. For instance, implicational schemata have been used to account for attributions of ability (Reeder, Messick, & Van Avermaet, 1977) and attributions of attitude (Miller & Rorer, note 1). We hope future research will yield a more definitive evaluation of this approach.

Reference Notes

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Table 1

Mean Attributed Morality (Collapsed Across Scenario) as a Function of Behavior and Demand.

	Situational Demands	
Behavior	Moral	Immoral
Moral	7.05	9.65
Immoral	3.08	4.50

Note. Attributions of morality were made on an 11-point scale anchored by (1) "Very Immoral" and (11) "Very Moral".

Table 2

Mean Attributed Propensity to Lie (Collapsed Across Scenario) as a Function of Behavior and Demand.

	Situational Demands	
Behavior	Moral	Immoral
Moral	6.65	8.43
Immoral	4.30	5.38

Note. Attributions were made on an 11-point scale anchored by (1) "Often" and (11) "Never".